

How to Create an Effective School Communications Plan

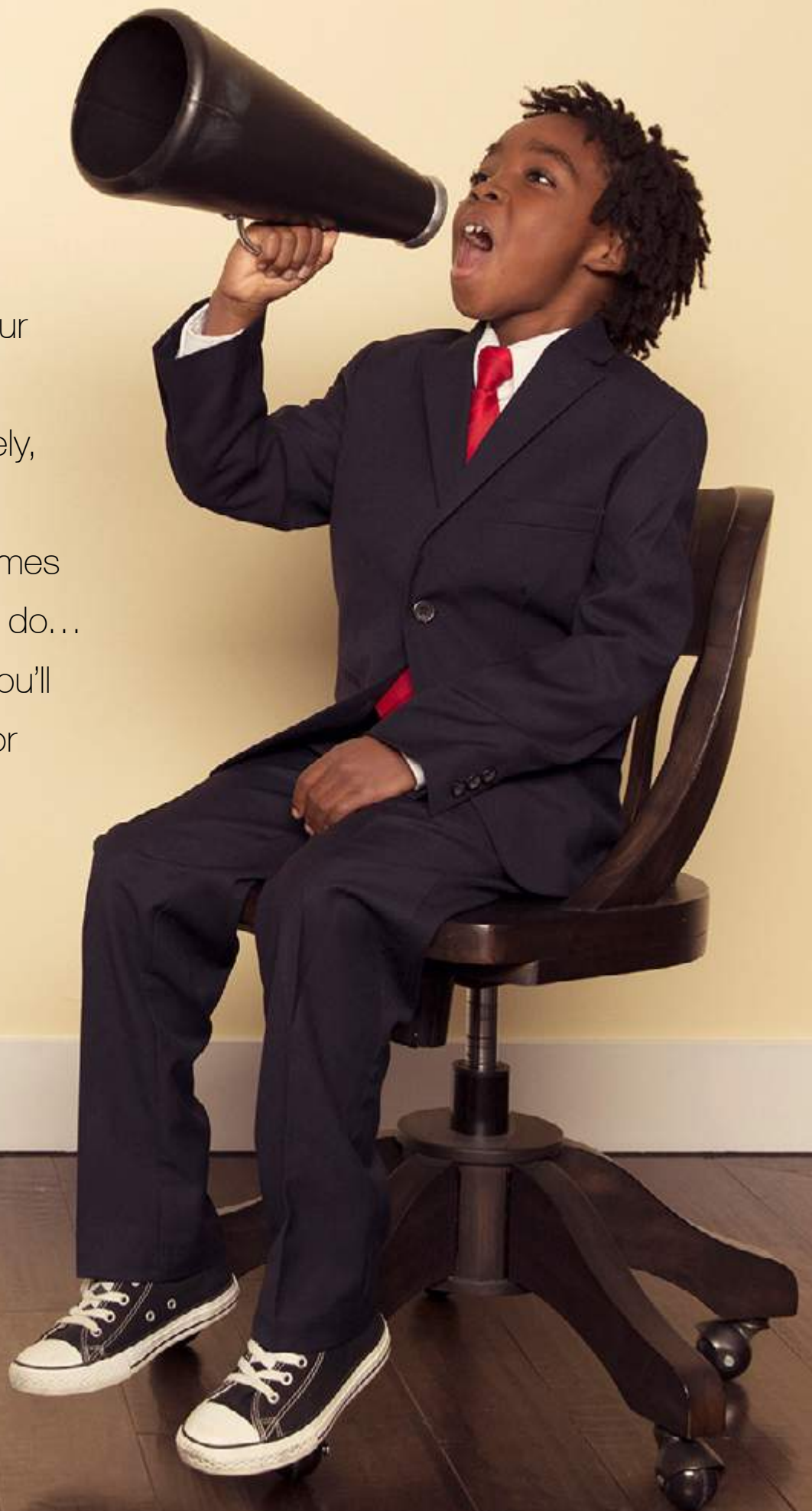
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In today's hectic but connected world, one in which parents and students and teachers and administrators are all being pulled in various directions on a daily (if not hourly!) basis,

you need a comprehensive school communications plan in place to ensure your messages get heard.

Communicating your school's message accurately, effectively, and consistently to stakeholders becomes just something you do... and do well. And you'll reap the rewards for years to come.



STEP #1:
GET YOUR
TEAM TOGETHER



This is a big, high-stakes project, so you need your “A” players on board. You’ll want at least one representative from each of the following groups:

- Administration
- Teachers
- Parents/PTA/PTO (ideally the Communications VP, if you’ve got one)

Make sure everyone knows the scope and duration of the project. It can take months to put all the pieces in place, and everyone should understand what’s required. You should also, of course, emphasize all the great things that will result from your brand-new school communications plan when you’re recruiting talent to help get it off the ground.

This is also an excellent time to consider whether there are volunteer positions that need to be filled in order to put together a plan.

For example, unless your school is extremely small, we definitely recommend that your PTA/PTO have a communications committee. It’s a big job to manage parent communications for an entire school—and the bigger you are, the more organization you’ll need. You don’t want to rely on any one single person to organize all the communications from the PTA/PTO.

[A communications committee also builds in redundancy in case a star communicator parent moves away—or no longer has any children attending your school, which is bound to happen sooner or later.](#)



STEP #2: IDENTIFY YOUR STAKEHOLDERS AND GOALS

The next step in creating an effective school communications plan is to sit down and map out who it's meant to encompass. Here are some ideas to get you started, as well as what these groups will be getting out of the plan:

1. Students

Increased engagement with school curriculum and educators; informed of all curricular and extracurricular activities on a timely basis; greater feeling of school pride and inclusion; access to additional resources as needed

2. Administration and staff

Complete understanding of job duties and expectations; informed of schedule changes and emergency procedures; access to parents as needed; access to training and professional development resources; better understanding of the school's strengths and branding

3. Parents

Greater engagement and involvement with the school community; ability to learn about, and participate in, volunteer opportunities as desired; informed of schedule changes and emergency procedures/alerts; ability to easily access teachers and other parents as needed; resources to address questions and concerns; and of course communications about their children's progress and development

4. The media

Provision of newsworthy information about the school on a timely basis, to facilitate reporting and positive publicity for the school; knowledge of internal school media contacts

5. The public/taxpayers/local government leaders

Knowledge of new initiatives at the school and their impact on the community as a whole; information about the school that gets people talking and potential new students and their families coming in for campus visits

6. Community partners

(These can include other area schools you share resources with, local nonprofits focused on children and families, and local businesses and vendors you have a unique or long-standing connection with.) Better understanding of your school and its unique strengths; knowledge of possible ways to collaborate that will be mutually beneficial; mutual new business generation and positive publicity.



STEP #3: GET STRAIGHT ON YOUR SCHOOL'S MESSAGE AND STORY

No matter how organized you are, or how well-thought-out your school communications plan is, it will ultimately fall flat if you don't know precisely what it is that you're trying to communicate.

Your team should spend some time looking over your school's mission statement and values, as well as your perceived identity within your community. Does everything make sense as a whole, or are there gaps and inconsistencies that need to be addressed?

Maybe you started out as a K-5 school that expanded through Grade 12 a few years back—but your website still looks more like that of a primary school. Maybe you changed your logo recently but the old one is still showing up here and there. Maybe you have a new head of school whose unique vision and goals are not yet reflected in your public materials.

Many schools, to at least some extent, will have an “identity crisis” of sorts that needs to be addressed and rectified before the school communications plan can effectively move forward.

If you're not sure where yours might lie, start by asking the team members to each list five words that come to mind when they think about the school, and compare notes on the responses. Their answers might come as a surprise—and will give you a sense of what you need to focus on as you move forward with your communications plan.

Also—and this is important—make sure that your school's brand is reflected accurately on Google. For example, have you claimed your school's Google Plus page? Do you know how to manage it, and who has access? Is your school logo up there? What about photos and information that reflect your school's brand?

Managing your school's Google Plus page may seem like an insignificant, low-priority project, but Google Plus may well be where many online visitors first learn about your school—even before they ever get to your website! So it's essential that you make a good impression there. Click here to learn about claiming and managing your school's Google Plus page.



STEP #4:

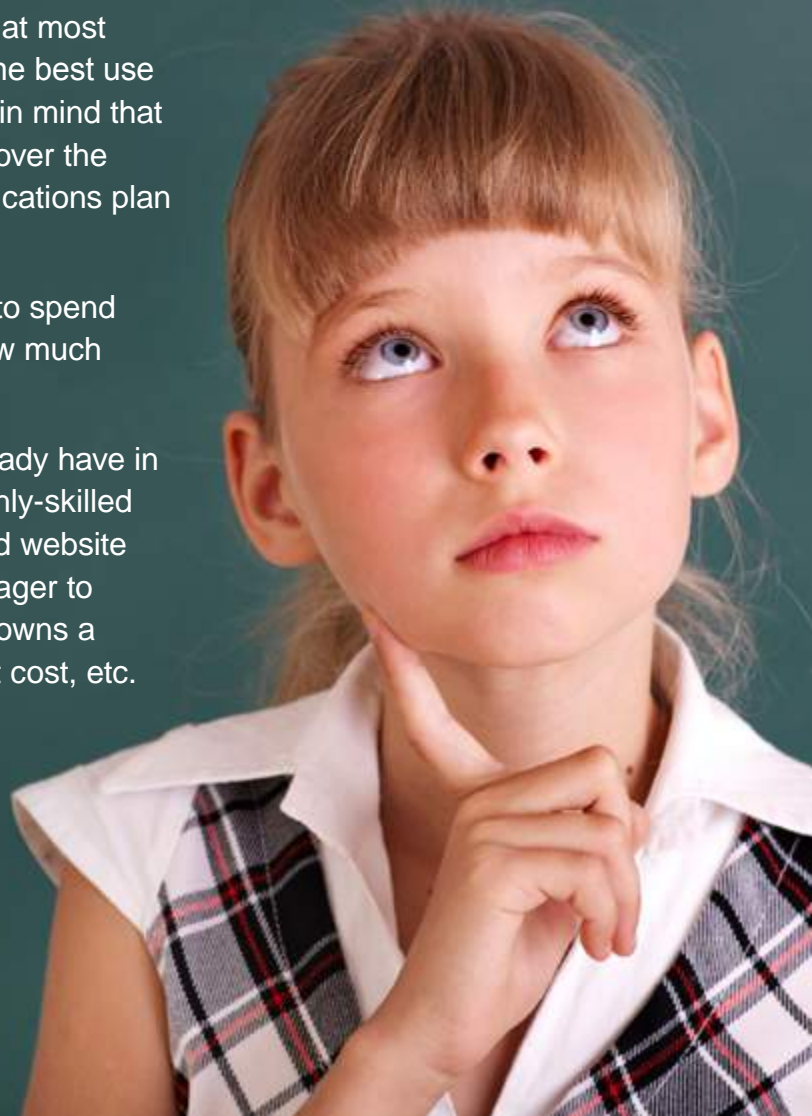
EXAMINE YOUR BUDGET AND RESOURCES

Given unlimited time and funds, of course, school communications would be no problem whatsoever—you could pay for an unprecedented media blitz, a team of full-time communications specialists, and a billboard in Times Square if you wanted!

This is not, of course, how things tend to work at most schools. You need to figure out how to make the best use of your limited time and limited funds, keeping in mind that it is a great deal harder to sustain momentum over the long haul than it is to get your school communications plan launched in the first place.

How many hours can you, as a school, afford to spend on your communications effort each year? How much money?

Consider what special resources you may already have in place. These could include, for example, a highly-skilled tech person who can easily handle any needed website updates, a writing teacher who is willing and eager to maintain a monthly school blog, a parent who owns a printing shop and will do work for the school at cost, etc.



STEP #5: START BRAINSTORMING

This is where things get fun. Keeping in mind your findings about your stakeholders, budget, and resources, start generating ideas—the more, the better—about possible ways to achieve your goals for each of your stakeholder groups via your school communications plan.

Depending on the size of your team, you may want to do this process in breakout groups or in one large group. Remember, when it comes to brainstorming, you want to get as many ideas on the table as possible, so this is not the time to be critical, dismissive, or bogged down in “what if’s”.



Here are some general ideas to get you started for various stakeholder groups:

- Students
- Big buddy/little buddy programs
- Age-appropriate portals on school website
- Homework updates available online
- Administration and staff
- Interest group forums (either in-person or via Intranet)
- Quarterly all-school meetings to address issues of interest and concern
- Formal plan for teacher training and development
- Parents
- Parent appreciation events throughout the year
- “Welcome kit” for parents new to the school
- Open-door hours at the school office
- Online parent portal (like MemberHub.com)

The media

- Designation of a go-to media contact at your school
- Press releases sent out monthly to a set list of area newspapers, TV stations, and radio stations
- Creation of a regular “expert” column or radio show by appropriate school personnel
- The public/taxpayers/local government leaders
- A “for the public” tab on your website home page
- Open houses throughout the year for local residents and prospective families
- School events of interest to the community as a whole that are well-publicized through appropriate media channels

Community partners

- “What are you working on and how can we help?” email outreach throughout the year
- A “resources” page on your website featuring your community partners, with reciprocal links back to your school included on their websites
- Mentoring programs for interested students

STEP #6: GET YOUR PLAN TOGETHER

By now, you should have a lot of ideas—the good, the bad, and the wildly impractical. If you don't, go back to the drawing board until you do.

What to communicate

Once you've gotten all those ideas out on the table, start sorting through them one by one, taking into account:

- **Budget**—what will it cost us to implement/sustain this idea?
- **Time**—how much time will be required to implement/sustain this idea?
- **ROI**—relative to the other options on the table, will this option give us the greatest “bang for our buck” in terms of achieving our goals for each stakeholder group?
- **Opportunity costs**—will this option preclude us from doing something else that's important to us as a school?
- **Measures of success**—how will we be able to tell if this idea is working for us? What is our definition of “success” here?

How to communicate

You also need to consider the medium and the tools to be used for each strategy—print, email, website, social media, or in-person. Some, like parent appreciation events or blog posts, can be done only one way.

For others, however, you have a choice, and a mix of methods is the best way to ensure you keep your message fresh and top of mind for

the stakeholder groups that are important to you.

While print certainly has its place, in this day and age, it's important not to overestimate its importance.

Jim Fitzpatrick, retired superintendent of the Essex Town School District in Essex Junction, Vermont, was quoted recently in *Develop a Strong School District Communication Strategy* on scholastic.com.

In the article, Fitzpatrick, who is now president of schoolspring.com, an employment resource for educators, had this to say about print vs. online communications:

Sometimes we tend to get defensive about the use of technology. We say, 'We should really be sending out print documents as well, and probably print something in the paper.' But when there was no technology, and we just had print, we never said, 'What about the people who don't buy the newspaper?' Now that we are using technology for public communications, the notion remains that we still have to employ the old technologies as if everyone reads the newspaper. How does that make sense?

We couldn't agree more. This is one area where “But we've always done it this way!” thinking can be both detrimental to the success of your school communications plan and very costly

from a budgetary perspective. Think outside the box, and consider setting print aside for all but the most momentous occasions.

Using effective tools for communication is equally important. MemberHub, for example is an all-in-one digital school communications platform. MemberHub makes communications easy, allowing teachers to use one common platform to send communications to peers and to parents. Follow this link to find out more about MemberHub: <http://memberhub.com/>.

How often to communicate



You may worry about being in the face of your stakeholders too often, but this rarely happens. More often, the problem is one of two things:

1. As a result of poor planning, the same message is relayed too many times (e.g., duplicate emails; email + printed flyer, etc.) while other, equally important messages are overlooked entirely.
2. Everyone is very enthusiastic about a new communications initiative but things trail off after the first few months, leading to sporadic (and ineffective) messaging.

The first step to voiding either of these fates is to come up with a set communications schedule. This isn't as hard as you might think—it doesn't need to be cast in stone, and it needn't be overly complicated. Here's a sample schedule:

- **Daily:** Facebook, Twitter
- **Weekly:** Internal and external website homepage news updates
- **Monthly:** New blog post published; ezine sent to current families
- **Quarterly:** Press releases emailed to local media contacts; all-school meetings held
- **2x/year:** Big events at the school + appropriate publicity

When in doubt, start slow and work up rather than trying to bite off more than you can chew. It is relatively easy to ramp up to a more frequent communications schedule, if you're so inclined—but if you take on too much too soon, you run the risk of getting discouraged and giving up completely.

Knowing just how much is manageable for your school is where the second part of the equation comes in: ownership. Planning, for example, a daily e-blast is fantastic if—and only if—you have someone willing and able to add this task to an already-full plate.

Regardless of how great your communications plan looks and feels on paper, ownership of each task on the plan is where the rubber truly meets the road. Someone will also need to act in an oversight capacity on a long-term basis to make sure everything is actually getting done as promised, and to reassign tasks if not.

This group will also be responsible for maintaining the flow of how communication happens. For example how does someone request a message to get sent to the whole school and when/how does that happen?

Whenever possible, tie task ownership to a specific position rather than to a specific person. This way, you maintain continuity even if someone leaves your school community at some point down the line.

Again, does your PTA/PTO have a communications committee? This is the time to identify that need and search for the right people to head that up.

Consider who might be available and equipped to handle school emails, social media accounts, website updates, phone call blasts, text messaging and blogging (just to name a few).



STEP #7: EXECUTE, REASSESS, AND REPEAT



Just as losing 100 lbs. is more exciting than maintaining a 100-lb. weight loss, creating your school communications plan is more exciting than maintaining your school communications plan.

The hard work of getting the plan together—and, make no mistake, it's a big project—is actually the easy work compared to executing the plan and keeping it rolling, month after month and year after year.

You should also plan to conduct a review of your school communications plan at least

once a year (even better, twice a year for the first year or two) to make sure everything is progressing as you want it to.

The good news is that once you've gotten the plan in place and had some experience with keeping it going, it becomes a self-sustaining entity to some extent. Communicating your school's message accurately, effectively, and consistently to stakeholders becomes just something you do...and do well. And you'll reap the rewards for years to come.

But it all starts with a plan. Get started on yours today.

About MemberHub

Built to increase parent engagement and promote higher student achievement, MemberHub connects teachers and parents to turn schools into thriving communities.

It's an easy, all-in-one school communication platform that combines all the tools parents, teachers and administrators need to communicate effectively.

With MemberHub, your school can:

- Provide a private online school directory
- Manage multiple Google-like calendars
- Post volunteer opportunities and signups
- Share photos in secure online environment
- Send messages at the entire school, entire grades, and classrooms
- Schedule reminders via email and text message

To learn more visit us at memberhub.com